

The Mission of God ~

Towards an Ongoing Understanding of Mission

Introduction

And Jesus came and said to them, "... Go therefore and make disciples of all nations". (Matt 28:18-19) Matthew's Gospel places these words in the mouth of the resurrected Jesus. We embrace this call to participate in the Mission of God in Baptism. Christians are to "witness to and preach the gospel not only because of Christ's command, but especially because (we) Christians are caught up in that overflowing fountain of the triune God's love and mercy toward the world."¹ This article is a theological reflection on mission and its current understanding as the Mission of God - *Missio Dei*.

Throughout Christian history mission has been understood and practiced in different ways - influenced by the Gospel, the signs of the times, historical and cultural studies, the experience of mission, and the current theology. Our secular, postmodern culture "opens up rather than shuts down the possibility of faith and of a new and exciting understanding of Christian mission."²

Mission of God - *Missio Dei*

At the 1932 Brandenburg Mission Conference Karl Barth³ presented a paper stating that mission was not primarily a human activity of witness and service, the work of the church. He insisted "it was primarily God who engages in mission by sending God's self in the mission of the Son and the Spirit."⁴

This led to the understanding of mission as the Mission of God - *Missio Dei*.⁵ *Missio Dei* is "God's dynamic process" in which we as church are invited to participate rather than

¹ Stephen B Bevens, "Revisiting Mission at Vatican II: Theory and Practice for Today's Missionary Church" in David G. Schultenover, ed., *50 Years On: Probing the Riches of Vatican II* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 206.

² John C. Sivalon, *God's Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 32. Sivalon is a Maryknoll priest. He served as a missionary in Tanzania and now lectures in the USA.

³ Karl Barth (1886-1968) was a theologian in the Swiss Reformed Church tradition.

⁴ Bevens, Stephen and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 290. Bevens and Schroeder are American born SVD priests.

seeing the church and ourselves as having a mission.⁶ This paradigm is a new framework in which to rethink our former understanding of mission. David Bosch writes, “Our mission has no life of its own: only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission, not least since missionary initiative comes from God alone.”⁷ Newer understandings of the Trinity emerged in the latter part of the 20th century, coming from a concern to relate the Trinity to the life of the church and the world. In the Catholic tradition the “general renewal in Trinitarian theology can be traced back to Karl Rahner’s 1967 essay on the Trinity.”⁸

As the Trinity is central to our Christian faith, these newer understandings have the potential to transform our own relationships and those of the Church with the world and the whole of creation. Catherine LaCugna writes, “Living Trinitarian faith means living God’s life: living from and for God, from and for others... Living Trinitarian faith means living together in harmony and communion with every other creature in the common household of God, ‘doing all things to the praise and glory of God’.”⁹

LaCugna writes further, “The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the ‘essence’ of God is relational, other-ward, that God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love and knowledge.”¹⁰ Given that God is a God of mutual and equal relations then the fundamental nature of all reality is relational.¹¹

Elizabeth Johnson writes:

The power of an interpersonal communion characterized by equality and mutuality, which (the Trinity) signifies, still flashes like a beacon in the dark night, rather than shining like a daytime sun... Yet the central notion of the divine Trinity, symbolizing not a monarch ruling from isolated splendour but the

⁵ Steven Bevens, “Partnering with God: Reimagining Mission for Today”, [www.mohmv.com.au/Resources/Stephen Bevens](http://www.mohmv.com.au/Resources/Stephen_Bevens), downloaded March 2020.

Missio Dei, or the Mission of God “has a long history in Christian theology, with roots in the Scriptures, in writings of earliest theologians of the church through the Middle Ages, and appearing also in the seventeenth century in the Trinitarian theology of the French School.” 5.

⁶ Sivalon, *God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty*, 35.

⁷ David Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390. Bosch (1929-1992) was a theologian and missiologist. He ministered in South Africa and was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church.

⁸ Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 291.

⁹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 400, 401. LaCugna (1952-1997) was an American Catholic theologian.

¹⁰ LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 243.

¹¹ Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), eBook, Chapter 2.

relational character of Holy Wisdom points inevitably in that direction, toward a community of equals related in mutuality.¹²

A spirituality of communion is called for in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. Pope John Paul II named the great challenge of the new millennium: “to make the Church *the home and the school of communion*.” A spirituality of communion “indicates the hearts’ contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us... (and) an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body...”¹³

In *Laudato Si’ (LS)* we read, “The world was created by the three persons as a single divine principle. ...¹⁴ Everything is interconnected and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity. (LS 240) All creation flows from the Trinity. This alters our understanding of mission, the Mission of God. LaCugna writes, “the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life”¹⁵ and hence mission.

The Mission of God – *Missio Dei* and the Church.

How then do we understand the mission of God in relation to the Church? *Ad Gentes 2* states: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.”¹⁶ By being missionary the Church emerges from the life of the Trinity and hence all are called as pilgrim people to journey towards the fullness Kingdom of God.

Jesus’ words remind us of this: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.” (Luke 4:43) Bevans and Schroeder write, “To preach, serve and witness to the reign of God is to preach, serve and witness to the gospel *about* and *of* Jesus, and it is to participate in the very life of the triune God.”¹⁷ God in God’s deepest triune nature is a

¹² Elizabeth A. Johnston, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 223.

¹³ Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, 2001, No 43.

¹⁴ Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si’* of the Holy Father on Care for Our Common Home, 2015, No 238.

¹⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ad Gentes, The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity in the Church*, 1965.

¹⁷ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 396.

communion-in-mission. Mission then is to be “lived out in dialogue because of the nature of God as such, and because mission is participation in that dialogical nature.”¹⁸

Gaudium et Spes begins: “The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the (people) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”¹⁹ The Church is called to a positive dialogue with the world, its people, its history and the whole of creation.

The call to dialogue with people of all faiths is found in *Nostra Aetate*. Our call to dialogue opens us to an understanding of the community of all peoples and their origins. God is the final goal of all. “His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all (people) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.”²⁰

Post Vatican 11 documents also refer to our share in the life of the Trinity and provide further development in the understanding of mission. *Redemptoris Missio (RM)* states: “The Council (Vatican II) emphasized the Church's ‘missionary nature’, basing it in a dynamic way on the Trinitarian mission itself. The missionary thrust therefore belongs to the very nature of the Christian life, and is also the inspiration behind ecumenism: ‘that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me (Jn 17:21).’”²¹

Religious Life and *Missio Dei*

Religious Life is “to be a more vigorous flowering of the Church’s holiness and the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity, which in Christ and through Christ is the foundation and the wellspring of all holiness.”²² The Religious is to seek to be the face of Christ: the chaste, the poor and obedient one. Through the profession of the evangelical counsels,

¹⁸ Bevens, Stephen, and Roger P Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 24.

¹⁹ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, 1965, No 1.

²⁰ Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, 1965, No 1.

²¹ *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Mandate*, 1990, No 1.

²² Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, No 47.

“the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God, even as it awaits its full realisation in heaven.” *Vita Consecrata 1 (VC)*²³ VC 21 continues:

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the sources of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole Christian life.

Conclusion

The Mission of God - *Missio Dei* calls all “to accept with awe the magnitude of the mystery of God as Trinity, ... to grasp with faith and imagination the unfolding mystery of the Trinity in creation and history... (and to live) in its presence through a new way of doing our mission.”²⁴ Bevans and Schroeder write, “mission today should first and foremost be characterized by dialogue... The interior life of God is a perfect communion of gift and reception, identity and openness to the other, communion in relationship and communion in mission.”²⁵ As mission is participation in the dialogical life and mission of the Trinity it is prophetic.²⁶

Missio Dei is a “single but complex reality”. It includes witness, proclamation of Christ the Saviour, conversion and baptism, incarnating the Gospel in peoples’ culture, interreligious dialogue, commitment to social development and liberation. (*RM* 41-60) The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians sets the tone. We read, “we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” (1Thess 2:7,8)

In his letter *To All Consecrated People* in 2014, Pope Francis wrote, “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world’... I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find

²³ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of the Holy Father John Paul 11 to the Bishops and Clergy, Religious Orders and Congregations, Societies of Apostolic life, Secular Institutes and all the Faithful on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and the World, 1996.

²⁴ Sivalon, *God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty*, 71,72.

²⁵ Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, 348.

²⁶ Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, 349.

ways to create 'alternate spaces', where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive."²⁷

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Some questions for reflection and discussion:

What new understandings do you have after reading this article?

What are some of the implications that follow?

²⁷ Francis, *To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, November 21, 2014, no. 2, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html. Downloaded November 2019.